



6th International Research Symposium in Service Management, IRSSM-6 2015, 11-15 August
2015, UiTM Sarawak, Kuching, Malaysia

Manufacturers Satisfaction on Logistics Service Quality: Operational, Relational and National Culture

Abdul Khabir Rahmat^{a,*}, Nasruddin Faisol^b

^{a, b} *Malaysia Institute of Transport, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam 40450, Malaysia*

Abstract

A number of studies had been conducted in western countries (e.g. Mentzer 2007) which identified the elements contributing to satisfaction. The difference in cultural background between individualistic countries and collectivist countries might suggest variations on how collectivist societies value the element of logistics service and how they derived maximum satisfaction. The objectives of the study were to investigate on what makes the users of logistics service satisfied among the collectivist societies. Qualitative research was deployed, whereby the main data were collected by using face-to-face interviews using semi-structured interviews. Four logistics service providers and three logistics service users (manufacturers) were interviewed. Data were transcribed and analysed by identifying the theme and patterns with the aim to understand the preset and emerging theories. The findings showed that in achieving customer satisfaction in Malaysia's context, operational technical ability within the logistics service quality (LSQ), such as timeliness and service condition, is a basic element contributing to satisfaction subject to influence of cultural values. The emerging elements provide the key insights on the elements and sub-elements which lead to satisfaction in the context of Malaysian logistics service users. Rather than the organization's performance-related factors, the results revealed that within the Malaysian national cultural context, there are influences of cultural elements towards customer satisfaction.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak

Keywords: logistics service quality; national culture; collectivist society; Malaysian manufacturers

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6-012-919-6944.
E-mail address: abd_khabir@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

1.1. The concept of culture

Concept of culture has been explored by social scientists since few decades ago, resulting in the emergence of over 400 definitions (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Michael, 2010). Based on Johannes (1996), there are two basic meanings of culture. The first refers to civilization, which is the intricacy in intelligence as in arts, literature, education, sports and entertainment. Culture can be observed in different perspectives that refer to symbols, norms, heroes and values shared by a social group. The second refers to cultural value. It is the core of culture which becomes the principle for a society on what is perceived as good or bad, clean or dirty, normal or abnormal, logical or not logical, rational or irrational, and fair or unfair from their very own perspectives.

Culture values are derived from the continuous mind program through human day-to-day experiences, which are being transferred from families and surroundings. These values are strongly bonded, whereby detaching and remolding them are arduous tasks. Aquilon (1997) wrote that cultural values help to explain the reason why a person may think that what he/she does is always the best method and the most common, natural and acceptable practice, while other people have contradicting views and feelings towards any actions and thoughts. According to Hofstede et al. (2010), socio anthropologists emanate the idea that each society may have a different way of solving the same type of basic problem.

Mentzer, Myers and Cheung (2004) addressed that logistics service quality (LSQ), like any other services, is also subjected to consideration to cultural elements, and they have recommended for further detailed investigations on how national culture and organizational culture influence LSQ and customer satisfaction. Hofstede et al. (2010) topped it up with the notion that having the ability to be equipped with the knowledge on cultural elements is an advantage for a firm to be ahead in the market. Majority of studies conducted began in the hospitality service industry, such as hotel services by incorporating the SERVQUAL model, in which most of the studies compared results of the SERVQUAL between two or more countries. Most of the work proved that there are variations in terms of the expectation between each SERVQUAL component (Dash, Bruning, & Acharya, 2009; Espinoza, 1999; Furrer, Liu, & Sudharshan, 2000; Kutter, Dalama, Rey, & Carlos, 2007; Liu, Furrer, & Sudharshan, 2001; Reid, 2011; Seo, 2012). Within the logistics management study, the work which incorporated national culture explored the effects in the relationship among logistics chain, labor skills and employment. However, for the China Guanxi study, there is little work done on the exploration of national culture from the perspective of LSQ and customer satisfaction to date.

Logistics service quality model developed by Mentzer, Flint and Hult, (2001) consists of nine (9) constructs to determine customer satisfaction. It includes Personnel Contact Quality, Order Release Quantity, Information Quality, Ordering Procedures, Order Accuracy, Order Condition, Order Quality, Timeliness and Order Discrepancy Handling. The development of LSQ tools has gone through two major phases beginning with the qualitative method and further refined with the quantitative method. In order to explore further in understanding the effects of culture on LSQ, replicating the original LSQ model may not be sufficient as there is tendency to neglect any other unknown components. Further, it is also important to note that the first phase development of LSQ is gathered from the customer of Department of Logistics American (DLA), whereby all of the components emerged are derived from the perspective of western manufacturers and users.

Although the model has been widely used and validated in various countries, this study attempted to explore whether a collectivist culture like Malaysia has a different view on how LSQ and customer satisfaction are formed. Between western and non-western cultures, there are numerous differences in the national culture dimension (Abdullah & Low, 2001; Abdullah, 1996; Hofstede, 2011; Schermerhorn, 1994). Two dimensions which are highly different are power distance and individualist vs collectivism paradigm, as illustrated in Table 1.

By considering this differences, the author decided to conduct a qualitative work as in Mentzer's phase one in order to identify any other emerging themes.

Malaysia is a multi-racial and multi-cultural society, with a total population of approximately 30 million people. It is hard to find an official published Malaysian population. Even in the Department of Statistics Malaysia, researchers may only found the data of 2008 but updated in 2014. Based on the country's meter information, it is estimated that the total population has reached 30 million. The Malays, Chinese and Indians, who make up 67.4%, 24.6% and 7.5%, respectively, are the major ethnic groups, while the other 1.6% comprises other indigenous groups. The Malays and other indigenous groups are the Bumiputera (son of the soil), in which the Malays form the largest

group. With multiple cultures, there are underlying beliefs that have shaped the values mainly among the Malays (budi complex) and the Chinese (Confucianism) business culture (Abdullah, 1996; Storz, 1999). Based on Hofstede et al. (2010), in the national culture index, Malaysia is a country with high power distance and consists of a collectivist society.

Table 1. Key differences between collectivist and individualist societies in language, personality and behaviour.

Collectivist	Individualist
Use of the word “I” is avoided	Use of the word “I” is encouraged
Interdependent self	Independent self
On personality tests, people score more introvert	On personality tests, people score more extravert
Showing sadness is encouraged and happiness is discouraged	Showing happiness is encouraged and sadness is discouraged
Slower walking speed	Faster walking speed
Consumption patterns show dependence on others	Consumption patterns show self-supporting lifestyle
Social network is the primary source of information	Media are the primary source of information
A smaller share of both private and public incomes is spent on healthcare	A large share of both private and public incomes is spent on healthcare
People with disabilities are a shame on the family and should be kept out of sight	People with disabilities should participate as much as possible in normal life

Source: Hofstede, G, Hofstede G.J, Minkov, M., (2010) Cultures and Organizations, Software of the Minds, Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival

Considering the growth of 3PL industry, one of the crucial areas suggested for 3PL Malaysian researchers is customer satisfaction level among logistic users and the quality of logistics services (Abu Bakar, Jaafar, Faisol, & Muhammad, 2012; Rahmat & Faisol, 2014; Roslan, Wahab, & Abdullah, 2015; Sze et al., 2012). There are numerous studies which explore the service quality of logistics in Malaysia utilising different work and tested the correlation with other models. The core question that guided this study is as follows: Do the Malaysian cultural values have any influence on manufacturers’ satisfaction towards the quality of outsourced logistics service? Hence, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to the theoretical understanding on the components of quality of logistics service and how customer satisfaction emerges among Malaysian manufacturers.

Various preceding research studies have shown that there are different outcomes and new emerging themes when a western model was tested in different settings. For example, in the development of long-term relationship among contractors in Malaysia, the work of Faisol and Jaafar (2011) discovered that it is not only the operational aspect like the quality of service provided and punctuality were significant. However, it is more to the elements such as friendliness, personal relationship, *terhutang budi* (indebtedness) and social interaction, which are highly crucial. This may contradict with some western work which suggests that balance of power is crucial for a good relationship, but in the Malaysian culture, power difference is a key contributor to a faster and good relationship. Therefore, this information review provides a justification on the need to conduct this study.

2. Research methodology

To obtain more insights into manufacturers’ satisfaction on 3PL services, the qualitative method was deployed. The data collected were based on 7 in-depth interviews with the manufacturers and 3PL providers in Malaysia. The interviews took about 30 minutes to an hour. Each interview was recorded by using a voice recorder. At the end of the interview, the data were transcribed and analyzed verbatimly. Table 2 shows the summary of the individuals and companies, who had been interviewed. The interview questions were conducted based on a semi-structured form. The question asked covered on how customers were getting satisfied or dissatisfied with the service provided.

Table 2. Characteristics of four manufacturers and three 3PL providers.

	Organization	Type of product	Designation	Type of organization	Experience
1	M-A	Electronics	Logistics Manager	Manufacturer	4 years
2	M-B	Agriculture	Logistics Manager	Manufacturer	30 Years
3	M-C	Electronics	Logistics Manager	Manufacturer	14 years
4	M-D	Medical	Logistics Manager	Manufacturer	30 Years
5	TPL-A	Logistics	Branch Manager	3pl	4 Years
6	TPL-B	Logistics	Executive	3pl	2 Years
7	TPL-C	Logistics	Executive	3pl	3 Years

3. Findings

Within this section, we present the findings of the study. There are three emerging themes, namely; operational elements of LSQ (Timeliness, Delivery Condition and Accuracy) and one relational element, which is quality of key contact personnel.

3.1. Timeliness

The first emerging theme is timeliness. Timeliness is highly crucial for any manufacturers. It refers to a product being shipped to arrive on the time agreed. It must be within the time promised. Eventually, based on the data gathered, delays are negotiable and there is some evidence which indicates that logistics service users have allocated an extra time within their planning just to cater for the relaxed and slow paced task execution among Malaysian logistics service providers. For example, for Manufacturer A, when asked about getting the shipment to be on-time, he answered:

"You want it to be just on time? Off course we need it on time, but you know our people (referring to the Malays), they will only prepare their manhole when they got to pass (idiom on doing things at the very last minute)". The statement clearly states that the manufacturers as the users have a mind-set that the local Malaysian logistics players would do their work at a slow pace, thus indicating that a task which is completed faster than usual is a quality service exceeding the users' expectation. Meanwhile, similarly, when a Malaysian logistics manager who worked at a multi-national electrical manufacturing company - named as manufacturer B, was asked, he stated that, *"Problem with our Malaysian people is although our company's organization culture is a just in time oriented, our Malaysian 3PL is more to doing things at the very last minute. Sometimes, they can make it on time, but most of the time, they are late. It may cause us to face production line down, thus we suggest our management to consider some stocks."* He added that in comparing between Japanese and Malaysian 3PL providers (they have two different national agents) *"The Japanese are different, if they tell you that they will arrive within 2 days, sometimes they even arrive within 1 and half day, they won't take long, and if there are problems with customs, they will alert you earlier, while the local providers will only alert you the day they should arrive."* From both statements highlighted, within the Malaysian 3PL service providers, among the traits of Malaysians as reported in the work of Abdullah and Low (2001) are relaxed, laid back and slow paced.

However, the tolerance to delay may apply in operational activities during the services and it relies on the level of closeness between providers and contact person (which will be presented in point 3.4). Based on the findings, it is also important to report that the tolerance to delay does not work in the pre-transaction context, or in the decision making stage where punctuality is a sensitive matter in the hand of the person who holds the power to make the decision. For instance, if a new third party logistics provider has made an appointment with a purchasing or logistics manager in a business deal in Malaysia, punctuality is a must in that sense. However, if the manager is delaying an appointment due to an official or non-official matter, it is a common practice and is acceptable if the person who has made the appointment (in this case, the logistics service provider) to wait longer for the manager.

This was evident in the interview with Logistics Service Provider A, where he indicated that, *"it is common for us to spend 4-5 hours travelling to Kuala Lumpur from Kuantan just to meet them for 30 minutes, and we will*

usually be 1 hour earlier. ...we don't mind if we have to wait if they have some other meetings. You can't do anything with that, you just wait, they are happy that you're there and listen to them even for a short while, and we are glad that our customers acknowledge us that they are not worried because we always be there on time." The statement was clear evidence on how cultural values implicate on manufacturers' expectation on timeliness component within collectivist society. In two different occasions which occur during the pre-transaction and the service, collectivistic societies have lower expectation on timeliness. To them, as long as the product arrives and their end customers do not complain, it is still considered and accepted as being punctual.

3.2. Product condition / delivery accuracy

In operational context, especially in logistics operation, it will be meaningless if the product does not arrive in the right condition that it should be. This includes ensuring it to be clean, as good as it is from the point it is picked for delivery until the location it needs to be, with the same quantity, same condition and arranged as requested by the sender. It is another basic component leading to manufacturers' satisfaction. As illustrated in the following statement by Manufacturer A:

"They need to ensure that the quantity is tallied with the delivery orders given, and the condition is as good as when our warehouse department passes it to them, or else our customer will reject to receive it, and if anything happens like product missing or if there are damages, usually we will ask them to investigate the issue, and if there is any damage or a missing product, we will settle it with an insurance claim." Almost all the manufacturers reported that the case of missing products during delivery or in the warehouse is very rare nowadays. Furthermore, it is usually the manufacturers themselves who pack the product for delivery at their own warehouse and arrange the quantity and item to be delivered, thus, most of the errors of wrong quantity or product are caused by the manufacturers.

Wrong information, incomplete information, confusing information, and late information are non-tolerable, be it in verbal or written information, it must be clearly communicated and delivered as promised. Customers also appreciate the providers if they are being updated on any delays rather than being kept in silence. Manufacturer F stated that, *"if they promise to arrive within three days, so the things must arrive within three days, or if they cannot, they need to notify us immediately, the crucial part is to inform the customers exactly if there are any issues at ports or customs, if not, they're in trouble."*

3.3. The key contact personnel

Another emerging theme which is deemed important is the quality of key contact personnel. This element is identified based on logistics service users' comments, which actually describe more about the personnel's way of doing work, the way they communicate, the responsiveness, the knowledge on their products, and the way they care on each task. The key contact personnel is any person who deals with the manufacturers; it is a human interaction and communication between the manufacturers and the third party logistics service key person. It can be either through mobile communication, email or face-to-face encounters. It is the most important component as there are various sub-components which are critically linked to the operational elements and subsequently lead to satisfaction. It is within this dimension that cultural values are attached to each behaviour.

3.3.1. Key person emotion closeness between boundary personnel

This sub-component is detected from the following statements by the informant of Manufacturer C. When asked probing questions on why the previous logistics service providers were not being used anymore, the informant indicated that, *"There's no problem with Logistics Providers C, they do perform well, but my boss chooses the new ones because they are our customers too and are very close to our boss."* Similarly, from the logistics providers' point of view, Logistics Service Provider B commented, *"One of the reasons we're chosen is because we're also from the east coast, we can speak with the same dialect, the deals go easily when we start to speak the same local dialect, and now we are very close with our customers."* Likewise, Manufacturer D also gave the same view, *"Our 3PL have served us for more than 30 years, we are very close friends, and yes, we do have contracts, but we put that aside."*

The closeness between the key contact personnel is important to align the expectation of the users. For example,

according to Logistics Service Providers B, *“Our containers are so bad compared to our competitors, their containers are much cleaner and look better, our customers are very particular at choosing the containers because they are sending cosmetics and soap products, but due to us being close with each other, we are able to align their expectation on the containers, sometimes, our customers even complain that our containers look like garbage cans, but we are able to lower their expectation, in which they can accept to use them.”* In addition, being attentive to any requests is considered critical by the manufacturers. According to Manufacturer B, *“We like our current LSP because they are very attentive to our needs, I don’t have to worry because I know they will definitely answer my call at any time and have the answer for everything I ask, that what makes me trust them and stick with them.”*

Logistics Service Providers C also highlighted on the close relationship between the sales executive with manufacturers, whereby he commented, *“When this sales guy resigned and moved to other company, his customers also moved. When he decided to return to the company, his customers returned too.”* The network or friends or cables which the key person has is also a key component which enables the process related to clearance in custom, or ability to delay the shipping process is deemed as a special value added skill for 3PL providers, particularly in the context of freight forwarding agents. According to Logistics Service Provider B, *“It is very important for us to have a close contact with the port authorities and customs, this relationship shall enable us to work efficiently, let say in case of our end customers delay to gate in their product, we can talk to the related agency like the port authority and the ship to hold for a while, or else the shipment will need to wait for the next ship which is the following week.”* Similar to lorry drivers, some manufacturers are satisfied with a transporter when they have a driver who is well versed with the route to end customers, know their customers and able to negotiate timeliness and product accuracy/condition.

Many studies in Asian countries discover the importance of establishing personal relationship (Abdullah, 1996; Sloane, 1999; Wang, 2007). According to Wang (2007), personal relationship among individuals of business organizations describes on caring and being friendly with each other way beyond the business focus. It extends to the openness to get the parties emotionally involved. It is a process which requires a deep knowledge of the other parties and understanding of their thinking (Wang, 2007). Among the Chinese, many studies define ‘guanxi’ as the connection or personal relationship (e.g. Wang, 2007; Yang, 2011; Zhuang, Xi, & Tsang, 2010) stated that Chinese ‘Guanxi’ is unlike the Western relationship marketing - in that the Western relational is commercial oriented while the Chinese Guanxi involves both favor and affection, and sometimes, the affective value is more important than its monetary value in social interactions. Abdullah (1996; 2001) and Sloane (1999) elaborate personal relationships in the context of the Malays. Abdullah (2001), for example, states that the Malays normally place good relationships with people as a very essential aspect in their lives. Consequently, they tend to prioritize relationships more than the task, even in business interactions. The relationships become personalized when they do not separate the business and private lives. Abdullah (1996) underlines that the completion of a task can only be achieved when people are familiar with each other and they have established some forms of understandings, relationships and rapport-building with one another. Thus, personal relationships may create a sense of attachment to the person and belongingness to the group. Conversely, direct criticism of views or opinions in business may also be felt as a rejection of a person. *(1999) explains that the relation among the Malay people whether in social or economic ties is normally called as ‘kawan’ or ‘friends’.

‘Kawan’ or ‘friends’ is interchangeably known as a ‘network’ (Sloane, 1999), or commonly known as a ‘cable’. The tie between ‘kawan’ is more than the meaning of friendship. The relation between close ‘kawan’ among the Malays represents a close personal relationship that shows the degree to which the Malay is expected to help his/her friends. This includes the promise given by the ‘network’, the great sense of anticipation that people will help one another to succeed in a business, will participate in business activities of their friends, and will trust one another’s good will.

It is also important to highlight on the possible abuse of decision-making power within this component. This is evident in a statement by Manufacturer D, in which he commented that, *“For an air shipment, I can easily get 100 USD per shipment (speaking in a lower voice tone). This is very common in the industry, either Malay or Chinese, but not those who hold to Sunnah business ethics. They won’t do this.”* This is supported by Manufacturer D, whereby he shared his experience by stating, *“This fellow got some percentage from the vendor, and used the money to buy a luxury car.”* This element is identified as one of the contributors to repeat in the usage of logistics services and manufacturer’s satisfaction.

3.3.2. 'Jujur' (honesty)

Next emerging theme, which is also within the key contact personnel components, is 'jujur' (honesty). As frequently mentioned by Manufacturer B, *"They need to be honest, in billings, in information, everything. They just can't bill us in lump sum, or keeping quiet until we ask them about our shipping."* Manufacturer C shared the experience about their previous 3PL, *"Mr. A is not honest with us, they even charged us RM100 just to choke a wood on our product in the containers, they just took opportunity on our trust."* That was one of the reasons why the 3PL were terminated.

3.3.3. Efficient in dealing with difficulties and crises

Users have more confidence on their providers if they are able to conduct the job efficiently, especially when there are difficulties or crises. Users are not in favour of dealing with logistics related problems as they expect everything related to logistics is done by the 3PL. The efficient providers who give less trouble to the customers are one of the reasons which makes the users satisfied. Manufacturer D mentioned that, *"The way they handle complaints and solve problems, so they are good at it, and they ensure that the same thing won't happen again ..."* In addition, Manufacturer A shared, *"We rely on them because we know that they good at solving all the problems, they know who to see and they don't need to go to a straight line, I don't care how they do it, as long as it is settled."*

3.3.4. Consistent service

Unstable performance of outsourced logistics service is not favourable by logistics users. Customers prefer providers who maintain their performance overtime, not providers who show inconsistencies of service. This was evident in the interview, as indicated by Manufacturer D *"Our previous freight forwarders are not consistent, sometimes they are good, sometimes they perform badly; thus we have changed to our current 3PL, they are more consistent..."*

4. Discussion

The results from the findings present a number of issues worthy of discussion. Firstly, this study extends the work of Mentzer (2004), which is to consider cultural elements in LSQ. Although the recommendation made by Mentzer is to identify how different countries evaluate LSQ components and study the differences in level of expectation, this study attempts to identify the emerging themes as indicated in the first phase (qualitative) of Mentzer's work. It is not surprising that the results had some similarities with the work of Mentzer (2001), especially in the operational or technical elements of LSQ (i.e. Timeliness, Delivery Accuracy, and Product Condition). Apparent differences were notable in the relational elements, namely in the quality of key contact personnel sub-components. The original key contact personnel within the work of Mentzer (2001) describes that the quality of key contact personnel consists of knowledge of the personnel, empathy with customer's situation and help to resolve customer's problems. Alongside with the three mentioned sub-components, new emerging sub-component is emotional closeness between boundary personnel and honesty (jujur) elements. This element was identified as an important component contributing to satisfaction. It is also important to note that the emerging theme has also been identified as part of Malaysian cultural values (Abdullah & Low, 2001). Other emerging elements within the relational elements are service consistencies and problem solving skills.

5. Conclusion

From this exploratory study, we can conclude that there are different elements of LSQ and customer satisfaction within the context of Malaysian national culture. This unique phenomenon requires an in-depth understanding to enhance and take advantage on the capability and potential. Future study should consider more manufacturers' viewpoints on the same context or consideration to validate the constructs with a quantitative method. The study is

limited as the culture studied in this paper did not characterise all segments of culture. Therefore, some important findings will not necessarily apply to other cultures that are not investigated.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM, Malaysia), Malaysia Institute of Transport (MITRANS), Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, Research Management Institute, UiTM, Faculty of Architecture Planning and Surveying, UiTM.

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